

Developing a College Student Support Strategy 2018-2023

1. Introduction

The centrality of students to the College is embedded in each of the College, the Learning and Teaching and the (currently emerging) EDI Strategies. These explicitly set out commitments to:

- prioritise the mental wellbeing of the student body¹
- foster an inclusive, diverse community where different backgrounds and cultures are cherished and celebrated²
- becoming as diverse as the world we seek to serve and to become more proactive and courageous in moving to true inclusivity, whether that is through tackling structural barriers or supporting individuals

We are making our teaching more challenging, more evidence-based and more rewarding, requiring much greater interactivity and positive engagement with our students. We are also seeking to attract a more diverse student population and already recognise that we have a moral obligation to support our students, within the boundaries of our institutional competence, particularly in relation to mental health and well-being.

Active and meaningful participation in teaching and learning for a community with different and increasingly diverse backgrounds means that we must be excellent in supporting all of our students. Our approach to support must be inclusive while also appropriately tailored to specific needs. Being world-leading in education may, in an individual student's eyes, be undermined if they feel their non-academic support needs were a secondary, or poorer, consideration. Students can only really benefit from our education offering if they are healthy, have ample sources of information to help them remain healthy and have confidence in our capacity to provide appropriate support if they encounter problems.

There is already excellence in student support across services and departments. There is commitment to and an understanding of the challenges facing students. But this is not the picture throughout the whole College and we must ensure that developments in student support are coherent across the College, provide a consistent student experience and are equal to the excellence they will find in the academic aspects of their lives.

This paper sets out:

- Current drivers for a strategic approach and improvement to our support offering to students
- Indirect benefits of improving the support we give to our students
- A number of principles that should underpin both the strategy, as we continue to develop the actions arising, and our behaviours in relation to student support and wellbeing

¹ [College Strategy 2015-2020](#)

² [Learning and Teaching Strategy](#)

- Recommended actions

2. Drivers and the Strategic Imperative

The primary internal drivers for a strategic approach to improving our support for students are:

- The Learning and Teaching Strategy, which champions active engagement with teaching and learning, community, diversity and inclusivity;
- The emerging EDI Strategy, as well as our obligations to the Office for Students Access and Participation Plan (formerly the Access Agreement)³ through which we will be seeking to diversify our student population, create an inclusive environment and ensure that we engage, retain and support our students to succeed;
- The increasing demand for support for students with mental health difficulties.

In adopting the Learning and Teaching Strategy, the College has committed to creating a world-leading academic environment for students. We will be asking students to play an active role in more challenging and rewarding teaching. Critically, from a student experience perspective, the Strategy states:

“We will foster an inclusive and diverse community where different backgrounds and cultures in staff and students are cherished and celebrated, and their different cultural experiences and identities are embraced in order to better prepare all students for an increasingly diverse and complex future work environment. We will foster a culture that understands and embodies the values of diversity and inclusivity, ensuring this is reflected in campus life, in the curriculum, and in the application of knowledge to real-life problems in a global context.”
Learning and Teaching Strategy, p3

If we are to realise this vision, we must do everything possible to support students in staying healthy, feeling part of a community and celebrating differences in more than just the academic environment. True excellence in the learning and teaching experience will act as a sharp contrast to a poor pastoral or personal experience and potentially diminish the impact of the academic experience. For students to be able to participate as active learners and to get the best of our teaching, they will need to be healthy, comfortable in their own skin and confident of getting support if it is needed.

The Strategy also picks up on the theme of our graduates developing a sense of personal and professional identity and being equipped to be the leaders of tomorrow. We should therefore be seeking to provide the supportive space in which students can develop their identity; this cannot be restricted to the academic arena alone. For those students who will go on to be leaders, to have responsibility for communities – whatever form that might take – we should be acting as an institutional role model for the behaviours that we wish them to emulate.

³ [Regulatory Notice 1: Access and participation plan guidance for 2019-20](#), Office for Students

Although the EDI Strategy is still in its early stages, an inevitable strand is the diversification of the student population. Whatever steps we take – greater numbers of students from BAME backgrounds; more students with a greater variety of disabilities; more students from widening participation (WP) groups, a more diverse group of international students, etc. – we must be able to support these students. We must anticipate their support needs and be ready to ensure that all students have every opportunity to thrive.

The current and increasing level of demand for the counselling service is well-recognised within the College. Demand has risen consistently over the last six years with a corresponding lengthening of waiting times. This year has seen that trend of rising demand continue. Within UK Higher Education, incidences of mental health problems are increasing and this is taking a toll on the academic staff to whom students will often turn, either for an initial conversation or for ongoing support if more appropriate, more specialist support is unavailable.⁴

Keeping within individual and institutional competence, we must develop a mental health strategy which addresses some of the causes of poor mental health, continues to destigmatise the issue and embeds understanding and supportive practice into the DNA of the College community.

There are already a number of major pieces of work underway within the College that will enhance the student experience and, as one of the consequences, will reduce the number of stressors that we currently impose. The Learning and Teaching Strategy will bring fundamental improvements to the academic experience, both in terms of student engagement but also on the nature and timing of assessments. The ongoing response to the Phipps report⁵ on institutional culture, and particularly the drive to address the level of competition felt by staff and students within the community, will further contribute to a more positive experience. We need to remain vigilant for every opportunity to remove unnecessary hurdles or stressors which lie within our control.

3. Indirect Benefits

Although improving student wellbeing and the overall experience could be considered reward enough in itself, there are some further benefits to be considered:

- Imperial has an excellent reputation. We must work to ensure that we continue to deserve that reputation. Students and graduates speaking positively about the entirety of their experience, including support, can only serve to maintain and

⁴ [Student Mental Health: The Role and Experiences of Academics](#), Gareth Hughes, Mehr Panjwani, Priya Tulcidas and Nicola Byrom, January 2018

⁵ [A review of Imperial College's institutional culture and its impact on gender equality, Dr Alison Phipps, 2016](#)

enhance our reputation whereas negativity about this area of activity can cause reputational damage and mistrust.

- Graduates who have had an all-round excellent experience of the College may be more likely to remain engaged as active alumni.⁶
- Creating a community in which staff and students feel more comfortable discussing difficulties and support at the early stage of a problem may not only lead to a healthier and happier student population but also reduce the number of students who find themselves in a crisis. Reducing the escalation of problems will ultimately reduce the pressure on non-expert staff to manage rising numbers of cases.
- There is emerging evidence that poor mental health increases the risk of being out of work and may be particularly damaging for young adults' employment prospects.⁷ In addition to the impact on individual students, this has implications for our Graduate Outcomes / Destination of Leavers of Higher Education and Longitudinal Educational Outcomes (LEO) statistics.

4. Principles

The following principles are intended to provide an explicit set of statements about the centrality of student wellbeing in the College's thinking, while providing a simple framework on which to hang our decision-making and actions.

- a) We believe that student wellbeing and support is everyone's business. Individuals will have varying levels of expertise, but we all recognise our duty to listen to and support our students.
- b) We will include consideration of the impact on the student experience, particularly in relation to prevention of mental health problems, in our decision-making. Gaining a degree from Imperial will not be a painful rite of passage and we will work to remove unnecessary stressors where they are in our control.
- c) We will listen to students' views of their experience with open minds, without judgment and will be flexible in our responses. It is not possible to walk a mile in every student's shoes, but we can avoid seeing their experiences through the lens of our own personal experiences.
- d) We will seek every opportunity to tailor support to groups or individuals; we accept that one size does not fit all.
- e) We will seek consistency in our approach to supporting students, decreasing the differences that are experienced between departments and between departments and services, except where required according to academic discipline. Inequality is

⁶ Gaier, S. (2005). [Alumni Satisfaction with their undergraduate academic experience and the impact on alumni giving and participation](#). *International Journal of Educational Advancement*. 5(4). 279-288.

⁷ [Finding and Keeping Work: Impact of Low Wellbeing](#), What Works Wellbeing, March 2018

divisive in a community and we will therefore work towards equality and consistency.

5. Actions

5.1 Student Mental Health Strategy

We will create a student mental health strategy using the Universities UK #stepchange Framework⁸.

There is a great deal of activity and many initiatives that already seek to help students prevent or get support with mental health difficulties. This can come across to students as disjointed. We need to review provision, ensure that we package our support in a way that is coherent and monitor the impact on student wellbeing. This framework provides a blueprint for undertaking the work necessary to achieve a whole-institution, strategic approach to student mental health.

5.2 Suicide Prevention Strategy

We will develop a suicide prevention strategy. Between 2007 and 2015, student suicides in the UK increased by 79%, from 75 to 134.⁹ We will work towards being a suicide-safer university by educating our staff and students on risk identification and response; by identifying and proactively supporting students with characteristics that place them in a higher risk category; and by working with external agencies, including providing information for families, to improve and understand the architecture within which our students are supported.

5.3 Targeted Support Packages

We will identify and develop packages of support for students who may have specific needs for which we do not currently cater well enough. We will work with current students and experts to develop interventions and advisory services for students who identify as: BAME, care-leavers or care-experienced, carers, commuters, disabled, female (where females are under-represented in the academic discipline), first generation, LGBT+, parents or from widening participation backgrounds.

5.4 College Transition Programme

⁸ [UUK #stepchange](#)

⁹ [Not By Degrees: Improving Student Mental Health in the UK's Universities](#), Craig Thorley, Institute for Public Policy Research, September 2017

We will develop a programme of activities to help students as they make the transition from applicants to joining the College community as students. This package should be tailored to a student's personal circumstances and level of study. It should provide some practical tools to help students settle into their new physical environment, as well as being a vehicle for sharing Imperial's values and expectations of behaviour prior to arrival. It will weave practical, social, personal, community and academic activity into a coherent package that reduces the volume of knowledge we expect students to acquire in their first week or so at the College and that clearly sets out our expectations of our community members.

5.5 Induction to the College

We will review and enhance students' experience of induction, ensuring an appropriate balance of practical, social and academic activity which leads naturally on from the transition programme. Induction will be a step along the transition journey with information and activities scheduled beyond the initial week of intensive orientation that most students currently receive.

5.6 Peer Mentoring Scheme

We will develop a peer mentoring scheme for all undergraduate students. Such schemes have been found to be effective in enhancing students' engagement, retention and success, particularly when linked directly with academic activity.¹⁰ This presents an ideal opportunity to link support, wellbeing and academic activity at the level at which students are often the most comfortable to begin talking about problems they are facing.

5.7 Staff Training and Support

We will review and enhance the training we offer to staff to ensure that they have skills appropriate to their required level of expertise and the confidence to engage with the conversations our students wish to have about their support needs and their personal experiences. We will work together to identify and implement support for academic staff who support students.

5.8 College-Wide Case Management System

We will source and implement a case management process and support system to:

¹⁰ [Building Student Engagement and Belonging in Higher Education at a Time of Change: Final Report from the What Works? Student Retention and Success Programme](#), Liz Thomas, July 2012

- Improve our ability to support individual students, linking more seamlessly across internal services and tracking progress / outcomes.
- Enable us to monitor support needs, uptake and trends in relation to student support and wellbeing across the organisation, including responding to allegations of harassment, bullying, etc.
- Co-ordinate information about individual students in a controlled and confidential manner but in such a way as to enable us to identify risk factors for students before a situation escalates.

5.9 Relationships with External Organisations

We will develop links with local NHS services, specialist charities and other external organisations to:

- Improve staff awareness of external, expert provision of support for students.
- Improve student knowledge of and access to their support.
- Incorporate external expertise into the development of College services and guidance.

6. Conclusion

The College is unlikely to ever be in a position to solve every difficulty that our students face. However, student mental wellbeing and the prevention of mental illness are a primary concern for those directly supporting students and are explicitly stated in the College Strategy. There is clear evidence that there are growing mental health problems. The majority of the actions set out are designed to improve our ability to address mental health issues and to improve mental well-being, either directly or indirectly. They should provide a focus for our efforts across the institution, enabling prioritisation and coherence of departmental and service activity.

Adopting a student support strategy and undertaking the priority actions as a collaborative process between departments, services and our students will enable us to weave a better academic experience together with a much improved personal and pastoral experience.